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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the preference structure of repair sequences in conversation argues that the structure varies predictably from one context to the next, based on the interpersonal relationship of the interlocutors. In particular, it is said to depend on the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge among the interlocutors, including knowledge of the language used, knowledge of the topic, and knowledge of the message itself. This analysis suggests a different picture of the preference structure than that proposed by other researchers in that this analysis (1) accepts other-correction by a more competent or knowledgeable speaker as a normal response to certain conversational circumstances, (2) views the relationship between interlocutors and their conversational goals as primary rather than centered in turn-taking and preference structures, and (3) recognizes distribution of knowledge as the fundamental factor determining the preference structure of repair in any given interaction. (MSE)

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THE PREFERENCE STRUCTURE OF REPAIR AS A CONTEXTUAL VARIABLE

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the preference structure of repair sequences in conversation varies predictably from one context to the next based on the interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors. In particular, it depends on the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge among them, namely: knowledge of the language used (or competence), of the topic, and of the message itself. I will proceed, first, by analyzing some familiar conversational contexts which favor corrections by someone besides the original speaker, in order to show how the distribution of knowledge predicts this preference structure along with considerations of social distance, face, and interactional goals. Then I will demonstrate that the same factors naturally account for the preference structure in conversation between speakers approximately equal in knowledge and competence. This latter type of conversation between fully competent adults has been taken as standard by most past work on conversational repair, especially by Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977). Given approximately equal background knowledge and full competence, the current speaker naturally assumes responsibility for repairs, since he or she alone knows what message is intended. Any error a fully competent speaker makes is viewed as a matter of inattentive performance, so the second speaker has no occasion to perform a genuine correction.

Other-correction

Still there are many familiar conversational contexts characterized by a discrepancy in competence and/or world knowledge, for instance interactions between adult and child, teacher and student, native speaker and nonnative speaker. And these interactions are certainly no less natural or deserving of our attention than those involving adults who share a native language. Typical of conversation between adults and children - particularly between parents and their children - are exchanges like that transcribed below, in which a parent corrects a child's utterance in the immediately following turn.

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(1) Nick (4;5): I got Fritzy a little jacket - that's broken.[1]
Father : Torn or ripped.
Nick : Torn.

Here the child responds appropriately to the pedagogical correction pattern by repeating one of the suggested forms in the third turn to show understanding.

A considerable body of research has accumulated over the last twenty years on the speech adult care-givers use with children. Dubbed motherese by Newport, Gleitman, and Gleitman (1977: 129), this register characteristically includes expansion, in which an adult responds to a child's telegraphic utterance with a syntactically complete interpretation of it which retains all the content words of the original. Howe (1981:14) illustrates expansion with the example below.

(2) (Eileen [2;0] points puppet toward television)
Eileen : Skippy a telly.
Mother : That's Skippy on the telly.

Like this one, most expansions also count as other-corrections in the turn immediately following the repairable. So evidence of expansions in motherese automatically yields evidence for other-correction in second position. Moreover, depending on just how they are defined, and on the group of mothers and children providing the data, expansions can account for over 45% of mothers' extended utterances at all (Howe (1981).

My own data on parent-child interaction show a clear tendency for parental correction of children's utterances in the immediately following turn. The reasons for this preference structure are the asymmetrical distribution of competence and world knowledge in favor of adults, and their willingness to let children finish up an utterance before initiating repair. The same basic strategy informs teacher-student interaction in school, a matter I take up next.

The standard pattern for classroom interaction consists of a teacher opening, a student answer, and a teacher follow-up: In the opening, the teacher typically elicits a reply from the student, and in the follow-up move, the teacher may accept, evaluate and/or comment on the reply (cf. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Chaudron 1977). A negative evaluation which serves to elicit a revised reply counts as an other-initiated repair in the terminology used so far here. More often than not, the teacher will call on a second student for the revised reply, as in the following excerpt from a ninth grade world history class.

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[1] This example comes from some twelve hours of audio tape recordings I made of my own two children at home over a period of ten months, primarily to investigate their verbal interaction. Here and below, children's ages are given in years; months.

(3) T : ... the casualties were so heavy. By the way,[2]
what does casualties mean? Cindy?
C : Weapons?
T : No, not weapons.
D : The people that=
T : =Oh, okay, Debbie.
D : The people that are in the war - whenever
they get hurt or=
T : =the people that are hurt or killed.

Here the teacher takes Cindy's first attempt not as a performance error, but as evidence that she lacks the necessary knowledge, and so goes on to another student.

A teacher's comment which suggests a replacement for a reply amounts to an other-correction in our terminology - here in another passage from the same history lesson.

(4) Cindy : Okay, like wh- so what started it was because this
little country Saudi Arabia coz it=
Teacher : =No, not Saud - Serbia.
Cindy : Serbia.
Teacher : Serbia.

This example deserves special attention, because it shows that a teacher may interrupt a student even in mid-turn to make a correction. In fact, I found three instances of teacher interruptions to initiate or complete correction in a lecture and discussion period less than thirty minutes long. This highlights the teacher's power to control classroom interaction by selecting speakers, then determining the length and significance of their contributions. Of course, the teacher controls classroom interaction by virtue of his or her superior knowledge and authority, but more importantly, the evaluation and correction of student performance make up a large part of what teachers are expected to do. And it is this pedagogical goal which determines the preference structure for repair in the classroom along with the clear asymmetry in knowledge and power between the teacher and student.

A third common conversational setting which favors other-correction is interaction between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs). As Day et al. (1984) amply demonstrate, NSs routinely repair the verbal errors their NNS friends make, as in the passage below.

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[2] This and the following passage are transcribed from a tape recording of a ninth grade World History class at a school in a western suburb of Chicago. I am indebted to Greg Leitner for generously sharing these materials with me. In this and later examples, = shows latching of turns with no transitional pause.

(5) NNS : ... then you say what number is it=
NS : =what letter
NNS : wh-what letter, yeah what letter it is

Faerch and Kasper (1982) show that the NNS's level of competence plays a role as well. They investigated recordings of one NS interacting with six different NNSs chosen to represent different levels of competence in English. The NS freely other-corrected the beginning learners, but not the more advanced ones, presumably because the potential threat to face increases with the degree of competence achieved. What the beginner accepts as helping might seem an uncalled-for imposition by someone farther along.

As in my data, and in the classroom setting described above, the premise that the NS is helping the struggling NNS establishes a preference structure in which the NS assumes responsibility for all repairs he or she deems necessary in light of the degree of competence the NNS has attained.

Explaining the organization of repair

Common to all the situations which share a preference for unmodulated other-correction was an asymmetric distribution of knowledge and/or competence. In each of the situations, the more knowledgeable person apparently followed a pedagogical motivation with his or her corrections. This presupposed a fairly accurate assessment of the first speaker's knowledge by the one doing the correcting. Of course, this pedagogical motivation can only arise in relationships characterized by a difference in knowledge between the participants, so an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge is the necessary ingredient. The discussions of both classroom interaction and conversation between a NS and a NNS raised the issue of other-correction as a potential threat to face. Other-correction is a potential face threat because it shows that the second speaker has discovered a gap in the knowledge of the first.

In correcting a genuine mistake, a second speaker may threaten the first speaker's face by exposing his or her lack of knowledge. The threat usually disappears in exchanges between parent and child or teacher and learner, first because the parent or teacher presumably already has a pretty good idea of the child's or learner's competence, and second because the parent or teacher intends to help the child or learner overcome the present asymmetry in knowledge. Based on the asymmetry of knowledge alone, then, reason dictates that parents, teachers, and NSs other-correct children, students, and NNSs, in order to help them achieve equal status; and children, students, and NNSs generally go along with this preference structure for repair in their own interests.

The face threat becomes serious between NSs with approximately equal status and background knowledge. Other-initiation in the turn following some repairable may indicate misunderstanding on the part of the second speaker, which again defuses the face threat. But unmodulated other-correction in second position signals the hearer's conviction that the speaker lacks relevant knowledge, especially inasmuch as anything less than conviction ought to yield initiation only, to say nothing of simply ignoring the matter. After all, in interaction between NSs of similar status and background, the only significant asymmetry in knowledge is knowledge of the message itself, since the current speaker alone knows what he or she intends. Consequently, the only reasons left for the second speaker to correct or initiate repair at all are misunderstanding or conviction that the first speaker has made a genuine mistake. So even the potential face threat of other-correction ultimately reflects an asymmetry in knowledge at least in the eyes of the interlocutors.

Still, other-correction need not threaten face, either because the first speaker willingly accepts the role of learner or because he or she attaches greater value to factual correctness or to the task at hand than to considerations of face. In my final example, E(hrlichman) flies in the face of protocol, politeness, and the preference structure of repair described by Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977), in order to correct what he considers an important error on the part of his boss P(resident Nixon). Nixon, prepared to learn from an advisor, unfazed by a correction from a long-time crony or simply preoccupied with the problem at issue, apparently perceives the other-correction as no threat to face.

(6) P : The White House has conducted an investigation and has turned it over to the Grand Jury.
E : Turned it over the the Justice Department.
P : Before the indictments.
E : Right

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion suggests a rather different picture of other-correction than the one Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks present. First, it accepts other-correction by a more competent or knowledgeable speaker as a normal response to certain conversational circumstances; certainly there is nothing unnatural about interaction between parent and child, teacher and student, NS and NNS. Second, it views the relationship between interlocutors and their goals in conversing as primary, rather than beginning with turn-taking and preference structure to see how various interactions fit into them. Third, it recognizes distribution of knowledge as the fundamental factor determining the preference structure of repair in any given interaction. This accounts not only for the prevalence of other-correction in conversations between parents and their children,

teachers and students, and NSs and NNSs they know well, but also for the relative paucity of other-corrections in conversation between fully competent speakers with approximately equal background knowledge. Other-correction poses a potential face threat between approximate equals, because it entails a judgment by one speaker about a gap in the second speaker's knowledge or competence. Nevertheless, the face threat may lessen or disappear entirely, if the corrected speaker views the repair as friendly help or expeditious in the ongoing interaction. After all, other-correction usually serves to balance out any differences in background knowledge, and so furthers understanding, the interaction, and progress toward the common goal.

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